

Soil & Water Conservation Conference, Chiang Rai, Thailand

"God must think we are crazy! It rains on our roof, the water runs down, washes away the soil and flows down hill. Then we go down the hill to collect the water and bring it up again to drink it!"

This perceptive quote by an African farmer was cited in a paper on rain water harvesting, presented by Sammy Contreras at the WASWAC¹ 2nd World Conference in Chiang Rai, Thailand, 4th to 7th September 2013. The gathering successfully brought together over 200 participants to discuss '*Threats to land and water resources in the 21st century: prevention, mitigation and restoration*'. Presenters came mainly from China (where WASWAC is now based), Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand, but with contributors from S America, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, India and remotest but not least, Guam.

As with any such conference, perhaps 80% of the value lay in the opportunity to meet colleagues with similar interests and to strengthen networking. In this respect it was a great success. With 19 thematic sessions running in parallel over the two days, and partly overlapping with two other conferences, it was difficult to gain a balanced impression of the outcomes. A brief summary of the 100 or so papers will be posted on the WASWAC website, as well as short 'synthesis' of the event and lessons learned.



Conference Group: I-r Larry Willoms (Canada); the author; Sunny Ellis; Surinder Kukal (India); Wyn Ellis (TAA Rep, Thailand); Khun Keow (Thailand); Samran (WASWAC Thailand); Jose Rubio (Spain)

In general, too many papers focused on rather complex and academic measurement and analysis of soil and water loss aspects. There was inadequate coverage of practical examples of how to overcome the threats envisaged for the 21st century, through prevention, mitigation and restoration. Greater emphasis on people's participation would have been welcome, and consideration of payments for ecosystem services (PES) to encourage upland farmers to combat erosion.

However, some innovative experiences were presented, such as participatory conservation agriculture approaches for raspberries on steep Andean slopes of Bolivia (Franco Humberto Obando-Moncayo) and recharge of groundwater of the Batinah coast of Oman, using treated effluent (Mushtaque Ahmed). Successes in reducing water use in Punjab irrigated farming were described by Surinder Kukal but he conceded that water use efficiency is difficult to achieve as long as electricity for the pumps is 100% subsidised. Successful participatory approaches to matching inorganic fertilizer applications to actual soil needs through soil testing were outlined by Arabella Tulin from the Philippines. Yang Xiaomei used a case study from the Wei River catchment in China to illustrate the frightening deficiency in knowledge and awareness of farmers and retailers of the health and pollution risks posed by pesticides - 'poisons by design'.

So, what were the lessons that can be learned for such multi-national conferences in general?

- Time keeping: the original time allocated for speakers (20 minutes) was reduced to 10 minutes to enable inclusion of more papers, resulting in frequent over-runs.
- This meant that there was rarely enough time for more interactive questions and answers.
- There was no formal feedback system via Rapporteurs to the final plenary session. This was largely due to the understandable deficiencies in English language reporting skills.
- Being conducted in English was a constraint for many younger speakers, especially from China.

¹ World Association of Soil and Water Conservation. <http://waswac.soil.gd.cn/>

- Inclusion of small workshop-style groups would have been useful to discuss themes and prepare conclusions to present to the plenary session.

These observations apply to most such events. Given the overall importance of the networking objective, it is important to encourage wide participation. But to attend a conference, many people need to demonstrate that their paper has been accepted if they are to gain sponsorship: it is their only way to gain financial support, whereas networking itself has important value and does not need a 'paper'. An impressive feature of this conference was the large number of young and female speakers, especially from China. Although often seriously constrained by English language skills, it did give them an opportunity to meet a wider community of practice. A practical solution for conferences could be to offer optional training sessions to younger participants in presentation skills, style of presentation, design of *Powerpoint* slides (more photos, clear graphics, simplicity), time keeping and how to answer questions. Video filming and role-play could be valuable tools for this. And such training should not apply to just the youngsters!

A post-conference field visit was made to a soil and water conservation project of the Land Development Department (LDD) near Mae Salong village, in the upper watershed along the Myanmar border. Until recently this extremely steep land was used for cultivating annual crops under shifting cultivation. Under the LDD project, progress is being made to stabilise cultivation through introducing tree crops, conservation terracing and forest planting. Arabica coffee is very successful, giving good yields after only 3-4 years. The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) is supporting the initiative. The IUCN field manager Tawatchai Rattanasorn) is trying to gain support for local communities from lowland organisations through payments for ecosystem services but, so far, with little success. And yet this will be crucial in 'meeting the threats of the 21st century'.

Thanks are due to Dr Samran and Dr Li Rui of WASWAC, and to the Land Development Department of the Royal Thai Government for successfully organising and conducting this complex event. The TAA was represented by three members: Wyn Ellis, Steve Gossage and myself. We had been invited by Dr Samran to chair sessions and prepare a 'synthesis paper'; in addition (and at short notice), I was asked to speak at the closing ceremony!

The next WASWAC World Conference is being hosted by Serbia in August 2016.

Keith Virgo

9.9.13